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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

27 May 1964

DRAFT MEMORANDUM FOR THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

SUBJECT: New Estimative Questions Concerning US  
Courses of Action re Vietnam

*Needs Green Sheet*

NOTE

This memorandum has been prepared by the Board of National  
Estimates with the assistance of a special panel of USIB  
representatives (Senior Members of DIA and INR).

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1. How would a US military effort much greater in magnitude than that examined in Monday's SNIE (50-2-64) affect that SNIE's judgments? The assumptions with which we worked (see II-B, C, and D of the SNIE) envisaged fairly limited US force deployments. Had we understood that a major US force of, say, several divisions, might be involved, we would have altered the estimate in several important ways. Much would of course depend on how the greater US force was committed, where, what timing and phasing, and what explanations given -- aspects concerning which we have no knowledge at present. We nevertheless think that the SNIE would have to be changed along these lines:

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a. Large-scale US force deployment to the Western Pacific, positioned so as to appear poised for invasion of North Vietnam -- for example, in the Philippines or near the 17th Parallel -- would tend to obscure or perhaps even contravene the "clear and limited purpose" the US action was supposed to have: i.e., to persuade Hanoi to reduce the Communist insurrections in South Vietnam and Laos. Rather, it would tend to convey precisely what it was not supposed to, that the US was resolved to transform the struggle over South Vietnam into a war against North Vietnam in which the survival of the DRV regime would be at stake. In the event the scale of crisis mounted, furthermore, the difficulties of comprehending the other's intentions would increase on both sides, with more consequent danger than the SNIE now indicates that the affair might get out of hand. There would be less danger of misinterpretation by Hanoi if deployments were made to Okinawa, that is, at a distance at which there would be no ready inference that an early invasion of North Vietnam was intended. There would also be less chance of misinterpretation if US units, in the limited numbers which could be used, were committed to anti-VC action in the area south of Saigon.

b. China would take more steps to insure its own security, but we doubt that it would run much greater risks than indicated in the SNIE -- unless, of course, the US invaded the DRV.

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The USSR would doubtless take a more active role than indicated in the SNIE. The Soviets would see no alternative to conducting a violent propaganda and political campaign against the US which would increase tensions seriously. They would respond to DRV requests for material assistance. In the end, however, we believe that they would not allow themselves to become involved in hostilities on Hanoi's account.

c. An enlarged scale of US action would provoke a generally more adverse world reaction than indicated in the SNIE. This would be reflected in the extremely unfavorable situation which would almost certainly develop in the UN.

d. The greater US action would have ambiguous effects in South Vietnam. Initially at least, it would probably sustain the GVN more than indicated, both as it contributed to GVN capabilities and will, and as it exerted rising pressures on the DRV. But the VC would make an all-out effort to increase the scale and number of its attacks, and to intensify terrorist activity as well. At the same time the greater US input would tend to sap South Vietnamese initiative, arouse fears that the country was again falling under foreign control, and increase dread of Communist retaliation.

e. There would be increased danger, as the proposed actions were set in train, that the DRV and PL would move to extend their

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areas of control in Laos, though probably they would stop short of seizing all the Mekong towns.

2. Would it be realistic to try to compel the DRV to comply without bringing significantly greater US power to bear than that assumed in the SNIE? We can approach this question only by posing another: What would we be trying to bring US power to bear for? The original concept which underlay the SNIE was that our moves would be for the limited purpose of persuading the DRV to reduce the level of VC activity, and that they would be designed specifically to avoid giving the impression that we intended to threaten the existence of the DRV itself. Ideally what we want Hanoi to conclude is that our purposes are really limited, but that there is danger, if they do not comply, that we will go beyond them, and in fact menace the survival of the DRV.

This is a complicated message to get across clearly, and it is hard to say what precise array of forces and actions would insure that it would be accurately conveyed. We feel quite sure, however, that a large-scale deployment of force would be more likely to convey an unlimited than a limited purpose. Consequently, there would be considerable danger that Hanoi would conclude that it had no choice but to prepare for an all-out struggle.

On the other hand, we believe that GVN or Farmgate attacks on a few targets related to support of the VC insurrection, even

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unaccompanied by large-scale deployment of US forces, would have a good chance of conveying our intended message clearly and with adequate sharpness. What is important in these actions is not their scale but what they signal in the way of US readiness to cross a certain threshold -- to move toward a drastic change of the rules that have so far prevailed in this war. Small-scale actions would probably convince the DRV leaders that, while there was danger of escalation, there was also a good chance that by turning down the level of VC activity this danger could be contained. At the same time, they could tell themselves that the final battle in the South was only delayed, not lost. This might give us what we want, time to organize the South for more effective resistance. Consequently, we believe that bringing to bear lesser rather than greater power is realistic, perhaps the more realistic course, insofar as any course can be realistic in what is altogether a very bad situation.

3. What would the US buy if it brought such force to bear as might literally destroy the DRV? There are considerable problems here, both of concept and result. What does "destroy the DRV" mean? The US could certainly wreak considerable destruction on North Vietnam. This would not necessarily destroy its leadership, which would doubtless take to the bush if displaced by the destruction or occupation of Hanoi. Indeed, in our view,

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occupation of North Vietnam, followed by prolonged anti-guerilla operations, would be necessary to "destroy the DRV." The process of destruction and occupation would almost certainly have provoked near-universal world condemnation, considerable risk of war with China, and greatly increased Communist harassment the world around. Meanwhile, the VC would still constitute a considerable threat to the GVN; restoration of its internal security would not be assured by the actions taken in the North.

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